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AUTHOR Spuhler, Lee; Zetler, Alan
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ABSTRACT

Year One of the 3-year Montana Beginning Teacher Support Program (BTSP) was conducted as a pilot study to investigate mentor-mentee pairing functioning under the study parameters as evidenced by a sampling of Montana participants, and to develop a manageable research model to be implemented during the second and third years of the study. The study examined whether the formal pairing of a beginning teacher with an experienced mentor during the first year of teaching facilitates the pace and quality of the new teacher's development into a competent practicing professional. A sample of 11 beginning teachers, 11 mentors, and 11 school districts was the data source for the pilot year; each of the 8 teacher preparation institutions in Montana had at least 1 graduate in the sample. The purpose of data collection during the pilot year was to help define the research implementation content and procedures to be used during the remaining two years of the study. Data were generated in response to concerns about: (1) expectations and need; (2) common and individual goals; (3) the meaning and indicators of professional development; (4) constructing and using individual professional development plans (IPDPs); (5) mentor training and guidance; (6) structured and informal communication; (7) impact of the local context; and (8) logistics. Findings of the pilot project are summarized a 11 principles, divided into 3 categories: mentor-mentee relationship, context, and professional development. These principles are the foundation for the design of subsequent years of the study. Results of the pilot suggest that mentoring is extremely valuable for new teachers, and that further research should focus on success of the BTSP and how to make mentoring as effective as possible. (Contains 12 references.) (ND)

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MONTANA BEGINNING TEACHER SUPPORT PROGRAM

Research Report for Pilot
Year One 1992-93

Submitted July 1993

by

Dr. Lee Spuhler, Project Administrator
Dr. Alan Zetler, Project Evaluator

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PREFACE

This report is intended for distribution to (a) the Montana Certification Standards and Practices Advisory Council (CSPAC), (b) mentors, mentees and administrators who participated in the pilot year study, (c) persons or agencies who supplied input during the initial phases of the project (MEA, MFT, SAM, MSBA, etc.), (d) teacher education program administrators in higher education, and (e) other persons or agents as requested or as suggested by CSPAC or its administrators.

With such a distribution, the report is a compromise format to accommodate a broad spectrum of readers ranging from those who have had access to other interim reports during 1992-93 to those who need but a brief description of pilot year activity. Much detail has been omitted and appendix material such as forms and analysis sheets have not been included. Personal or district identifiers will not be found in this report. Persons interested in project detail are asked to contact the project coordinators.

This report is also intended to be used as a more detailed rationale for the research design of years two and three of the project. That design will be available to CSPAC in July 1993.

Those responsible for the project wish to acknowledge the commitment shown by the individuals in the pilot year sample. The eleven mentors, mentees, administrators and other district personnel understood the potential of their involvement and went well beyond the contributions of normal research subjects. If that group of professionals is any indication, the education of Montana's public school pupils appears to be in very good hands.

MONTANA BEGINNING TEACHER SUPPORT PROGRAM

Pilot Year One Report 1992-93

I. INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of Year One Restated

Year One of the Montana Beginning Teacher Support Program (BTSP) was conducted as a pilot study. The purpose of the pilot was to (a) take a comprehensive look at the universe of mentor-mentee pairing functioning under the study parameters as evidenced by a sample of Montana participants and, (b) develop a manageable research model to be implemented during the second and third years of the study. CSPAC refers to the entire three years of the project as a "pilot program."

Significance of the Pilot Year

CSPAC project descriptions and the meetings that followed with the project coordinators resulted in a study that departed significantly from the study conditions reported in most publications on new teacher induction/mentorships. First, the Montana project was not driven by statute, certification or policy that mandated teacher induction of some sort, after which implementation was a district or consortium responsibility. This is the case with the North Carolina Initial Certification Program. Second, other than studying the effect of formal mentor-mentee relationships, the Montana study was not targeted to address specific policy goals. This was the motivation in the California New Teacher Project, where goals such as retention of inner city minority teachers were paramount (Wagner 1990). Third, Montana mentoring was not part of a broader teacher induction or professional development effort applied across all districts or a targeted segment. These efforts typically address all teachers including those re-entering after a professional hiatus. Fourth, the Montana plan was not part of pre-service follow-up undertaken by the state's teacher preparation institutions. Fifth, the Montana study did not utilize "professional" mentors. Such persons typically have a case load of 15-25 mentees and often work as itinerants, a structure far removed from the one-on-one feature of this study.

The results of the three year project may eventually be translated into policy recommendations by CSPAC. A better net of professional support may ensue. However, during the 1992-93 pilot year, the researchers operated without any of the five conditions stated above. Likewise, the research model generated for years two and three must be one that examines mentor-mentee relationships that function locally in the absence of any of the five conditions, but which do function under the special financial and support conditions of the BTSP design. This feature places the Montana project in a unique position among mentorship studies.

Procedures for the Pilot Year

Pilot year procedures were designed to cast a broad net over a sample of mentorship sites. The issues and concerns that arose from the sample pairings were not apriori determinations, but instead were allowed to surface as participants lived the experience. However, the growing body of literature did serve as a reality check.

Documents and procedures anticipated to be used during the second and third study years were tested during the pilot. Among these efforts were district and individual agreement forms, stipend disbursement procedures, central meeting of participants, monthly site visitations, orientation and training, individual professional develop plans (IPDP), and professional growth indicators.

The research methodology was primarily quantitative. Participants were apprised of results as they arose. Some procedures were altered midstream because of individual or district input. Mentors and mentees understood that their contributions during the pilot year were formative. Qualitative descriptions of program impact, both written and verbal, were used to refine content and procedures.

Uniqueness of the Pilot Year

A sample of eleven beginning teachers, eleven mentors and eleven school districts was the data source for the pilot year. Selection of the beginning teachers was made so as to cover the ranges of school district enrollments, subject/grade teaching responsibility, pre-service college or university, geographical distribution, and American Indian representation. Otherwise, no attempt was made to control the multitude of other variables. Once the pairings were in effect, the triad of beginning teacher, mentor and local school culture created eleven unique chemistries that were not transferable. These experiences reinforced the contention that the Montana study examines the unique effect of one-on-one mentoring performed in relative isolation from other standardized support efforts. This isolation extended also to Western Montana College, the home of the researchers. The two coordinators purposely tried to avoid the impression that Western Montana College was a direct intervening agent on behalf of the beginning teacher in the sample.

Pilot year experiences were formative in nature. Although useful in perspective, they are anecdotal at this point and do not represent the major data base for the study.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The 1980s saw a blossoming of publication on mentoring related research. Broad flexible research projects were funded with a multitude of options, such as the California New Teacher Project, the California Mentor Teacher Program (Morey 1990), and the New York State North Country Mentor/Intern Teacher Program (Stupiansky 1992).

Narrow focus studies with external motivations were exemplified by six California districts that used mentor related activity as an experiment to improve labor-management relations (Koppich 1933). Peer review and evaluation were purposes in Toledo, Ohio and three California districts of Lompac, Poway and Santa Cruz.

In the west, New Mexico's Collaborative Induction (Odell 1992), the Arizona Teacher Residency (Enz 1992), the Idaho Teacher Induction (Hill 1988), and the North Dakota Prairie Teacher Project (Havilchak 1990) each represented new teacher induction with mentoring as a component. However, each was a university-district collaboration and mentors were not necessarily site-based or restricted to a single mentee.

The literature on the structure of new teacher mentoring programs over the last decade indicates that seldom, if ever, have formal mentor-mentee relationships been attempted without being associated with one or more of the five conditions stated in the introduction of this report. Site "buddies" have been used but these individuals were but one part of a broader network. The Montana Beginning Teacher Support Program appears to have no exact structural precedent as evidenced by recent literature.

Central to the Montana structure is the relationship existing between the beginning teacher and mentor as they function in the daily culture of their school. Each relationship is one of a kind. After studying the New York North Country Project, DeBolt characterized this relationship in the following terms:

> "At the heart of New York State's view of mentoring is the relationship between the mentor and the new teacher. This relationship is complex and unique. It exists within the contexts of a specific school in a specific community. Each school must recognize the uniqueness of its set of circumstances as it conceptualizes, develops, supports and evaluates its own mentoring project. It may be best to begin with the realization that projects cannot be borrowed from other schools. Each school must develop its own plan in light of its needs and resources. However, in the process of so doing, educators can benefit by the experience of teachers who have been pioneers in serving as mentors to new teachers." (DeBolt 1992)

III. DESIGN OF THE PILOT YEAR

Sample Selection

Eleven sites were selected for the pilot year. Each of the placement services in the eight public and private teacher preparation institutions in Montana supplied lists of newly contracted beginning teachers as of August 1, 1992. Names were matched with school district enrollments, assignment level - elementary, secondary or K-12 - subjects taught, geographic area and pre-service college or university. Special effort was taken to secure American Indian and rural school representation. If the matching created a desired juxtaposition of factors, that name became a tentative nominee.

School district officials were called and mailed information solicitating their participation with the name of a new teacher as the given. In this manner, districts could not load the sample with a new teacher of their choice, thereby insuring that the sample was a random representation of all new teachers.

Given the new teacher, the district nominated the mentor subject to the approval of the project administrator. When reflecting on their participation in the sample, most mentees were asked first by administration but some were unilaterally assigned. This was of initial concern to the researchers because participation was supposed to be voluntary. In a CSPAC meeting, the involuntary involvement of some new teachers was discussed but accepted as probably being representative of what might actually happen should mentoring become statewide.

When all parties in each district were in place, formal agreements were signed. Each of the eight teacher preparation institutions had at least one graduate in the sample.

Participant Contacts and Purposes

Two general meetings of all mentors, mentees and available administrators were planned and held, one a beginning orientation in September and the other for closure in May of the 1992-93 school year. A third general meeting was requested by mentors and mentees and held during January. The purpose of general meetings was to establish content and procedures and then to validate and modify such decisions.

During the months when general meetings were not held, project coordinators made visits to each of the eleven sites. Approximately 1,600 miles were required to circuit all the schools. Progress on planned activities and personal reactions were monitored during site visits. Seeing the context within which each pair functioned was of great benefit to the researchers. At the request of the participants, December visits were not made due to the pressures of a short activity-filled month.

Again at the suggestions of the participants, the planned networking of sites and the project headquarters via electronic bulletin board was not carried out. Not all sites were equipped, but the main obstacle seemed to be the attitude of the mentors and mentees in this particular sample. The stated reason was that, given the optional access to various resources, electronic networking ranked low in its benefits compared to other sources already available.

Data Collected

The purpose of data collection during the pilot year was to help define the research implementation content and procedures to be used during the remaining two years of the study. Data was generated in response to concerns about (a) expectations and needs, (b) common goals and individual goals, (c) the meaning and indicators of professional development, (d) constructing and using IPDPs, (e) mentor training and guidance, (f) structured and informal communication, (g) impact of the local context, and (h) logistics.

Structured response sheets, questionnaires, directory information, structured observations, structured questioning and interview notes were the primary means of collecting data. Project coordinators were also able to gain impressions through personal interaction indicators such as eye contact, body language, voice inflections, tears, frustrations and joys.

The majority of time during the May general meeting was spent in orienting participants to the concerns model of professional growth and getting their reaction to that concept. That reaction data was "soft" but necessary to judge whether the concept is one that is feasible for further use.

Analysis of Data

The responses of mentors, mentees and administrators, whether structured or informal, were recorded, paraphrased where necessary, and later categorized. These results were then given to participants at a subsequent contact for reactions and modifications. This latter process was used as a means of validation and was an essential ingredient in the formative evaluation process. In short, the analysis process subjected itself to the question, "Is this what you really were saying?"

Prioritizing concerns was done by frequency counts where possible. The researchers were able to do this with both individual and collective responses since the sample of eleven did not generate volumes of data. The IPDP analysis was an example of this process. However, when asked to prioritize or rank concerns, most participants balked. The reason seemed to be that individual experience in their local schools might not fit into whatever "norms" ensued from such rankings.

Mentors and mentees themselves performed some of their own analysis during consensus building exercises. They took brainstorming ideas, condensed them, and translated them into operational terms using their own language.

The procedure with some of the most potential value came from the inductive analysis of written and verbal descriptions of personal experiences. Anthropologists would refer to this as the "natives talking." This talk alerted researchers to why certain practices and actions are appropriate in one district context while rejected in another.

IV. RESULTS OF THE PILOT YEAR STUDY

A Basic Assumption

The tangible result of pilot activity appears as the research design for the two succeeding years of the project. Montana mentorship as observed thus far, both in experience and in premise, has modified the research question. What began as a general mentor effect has evolved into a narrower mentor effect in which (1) a formalized one-on-one relationship structure operates across many local contexts (2) mentorships are independent of the motivations usually associated with beginning teacher support in other states, and (3) a degree of mentorship support does arise from the Montana BTSP research conditions and the manner in which it is being executed.

State or consortium support and motivation may eventually come to pass and a few local districts may now supply their own mechanisms, but the research is proceeding on the assumption of no such foundations. At this point in Montana education, mentoring under these conditions would appear to be a more realistic investigation than would studying the concept under the assumption of anticipated support or eventual mandate.

Beginning Teacher Retention

Retention of new teachers is a valid indicator of program success. At the conclusion of the three year study, the sample beginning teachers should be compared to state and national statistics. In the meantime, it is of interest to note the retention of the pilot year sample. Ten of the eleven beginning teachers will be returning to the same district next year. Of the one exception, the administrator noted that the new teacher was better for the experience than might normally have been the case and could probably teach elsewhere.

Research Design Principles Gained from Year One

The pilot year cast a very broad net and the detailed results, quantitative where possible but primarily qualitative, have here been summarized as principles. These principles are the foundation for the subsequent design of the study and are classified into three groups; mentor-mentee relationships, context, and professional development.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship Principles

1. Personalized Assistance: Administrative efforts to help new teachers are useful sources of generic information. But only a mentor with knowledge of the beginning teacher's personality, style, fears and strengths can tailor assistance appropriate for the individual. Information is one thing, but addressing the new teacher's feelings is the real need.

2. Mentor as confidant: The spectrum of a new teacher's questions and feelings have to have audience. The mentor will be that listener if the novice has confidence that his/her expressions will be accepted and not disclosed.

3. Informed Intervention: Beginning teachers still have to make their own decisions. But an experienced mentor is able to suggest options and buffer the newcomer from inappropriate responses and actions relative to their unique school environment.

4. Mentoring Separated from Evaluation: Insecurity and weaknesses might be expressed to a confidant but must not be translated into summative evaluations by the same person. Formal evaluation of the new teacher must remain the province of the administration. The literature is quite firm on this point. Peer evaluation via mentoring is an approach used in some induction, but that method rests on principles different from those undergirding the Montana study.

5. "On the Bench:" This term was coined by an administrator in one of the pilot year districts. He referred to informal communication that took place as his mentor and mentee jointly coached athletic teams. That joint responsibility caused the two teachers to experience events together, thereby providing a common experiential basis about which the two could talk. The implication drawn from this is that the closer the mentor and mentee are in responsibilities, associations and physical proximity, the greater is the opportunity to communicate with immediate feedback.

6. Communication is not Automatic: Formal contact between mentor and mentee best occurs when the school provides released time for that purpose during school hours. Some pairs may be able to compensate, but myths prevail about teachers naturally talking especially in small schools. Released time leads to talk about professional development instead of irrelevant topics.

Context Principles

1. Context is Critical: Teachers attach meaning to events (as do other people) as they are personally affected by those events in their environment. Expectations are highly dependent on the definition supplied by the local context. Seldom is any given situation addressed or reacted to in the same way in any two schools.

2. School Culture and Community Culture: The new teacher functions in a unique school in a unique community with a unique staff and with unique students. While mentoring procedures may be generalized to some degree, the application of those procedures are different for each beginning teacher simply because of where they are.

Professional Development Principles

1. Beyond Survival: Beginning teachers initially have to make it one day at a time. But personal and professional satisfaction comes from higher level success that emphasize their impact on the educational progress of youngsters. If new teachers do not achieve this sense of purpose, burnout and flight from the profession is probable.

2. Professional Growth Defined: Growing professionally can mean many things. Unfortunately, teaching has not settled on a common definition. The Concerns Model of teacher growth (Fuller 1975) (Berliner 1984) (Borich 1993) has gained support as one indicator with broad application. This concept can be used as a quantitative assessment of growth with the proviso (suggested by pilot year mentors and mentees) that growth attitudes within new teachers may not be parallel with observed behaviors because of local expectations and restraints.

3. Mentoring is an Additional Professional Responsibility: Mentors typically are among the best teachers and are among the busiest people in the school. Some reward system is critical -- monetary, released time, professional advancement -- if mentors are to be formally responsible to the beginning teacher.

V. PILOT YEAR CONCLUSIONS

A Preliminary Mind Set

In retrospect, the pilot year project was viewed by the eleven district administrators as a good thing waiting to happen. They were pleased that the triggering by CSPAC had set the wheels in motion, at least on a limited basis and bolstered by financial incentives.

During April visits, talks were held with administration about their impressions of the concept. If any one comment summed up the collective conclusion, it would be one principal's statement, "Mentoring is the single best thing we could do for our new teachers." If this conclusion bears out over the next two years, the continuing research needs to address not only "Does it work?" but also what it takes to make mentoring the best it can be. The attitudes of both mentors and mentees this past year seemed to support that dual purpose. Those teachers have ownership in the Montana project and were very seriously working to help the profession.

Ramifications of the Study Thus Far

After listening to collective and individual reactions to the pilot year, it appears that local district interest stemming from their direct experience in the project may be the significant key in adopting mentorship practice. If state level policy and incentives are forthcoming, it would certainly be the primary inducement. But short of that, some districts have already expressed a desire to maintain the practice regardless of the research outcomes. Their positive experiences provide a motivation that may prove to be a benefit already accruing to the project.

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